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## Wilderness bill is the right step

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Now more than ever, as development pressures push in, Vermont's few wild places need protection.

The state's congressional delegation should be applauded for introducing a bill Thursday that would grant wilderness designation to more than 48,000 additional acres of the Green Mountain National Forest.

If enacted, the Wilderness Act of 2006 would mean that more than a quarter of the national forest would be wilderness, adding to the 59,000 acres already designated. No motorized vehicles and no commercial logging would be allowed. Lasting protection of those special places would be ensured.

The delegation is calling for 20,000 more acres than the U.S. Forest Service proposed in its new management plan, which was released last month.

This forward-thinking legislation by Sens. Patrick Leahy and Jim Jeffords and Rep. Bernie Sanders is intended as a gift to future generations, with a firm nod to Vermont's venerable conservation history. For instance, about 12,500 acres of the additional acreage would be named the Battell Wilderness in honor of landowner Joseph Battell, who left thousands of acres of woodlands that became part of the Green Mountain National Forest.

Vermont should be proud of its conservation legacy and the ongoing efforts to save wilderness. It is one of the rare states that have worked steadfastly to protect its natural environment and unique landscape from overdevelopment. These efforts must continue.

Few debates stir Vermonters more than the ones that deal with publicly owned lands -- and the Green Mountain National Forest represents half of all public land in the state. Many interests converge on this 400,000-acre forest, which stretches from Addison County to the Vermont-Massachusetts border.

The U.S. Forest Service has the near-impossible task of seeking compromise and managing the forests for "the greatest good of the greatest number." Its broad mandate can leave everyone dissatisfied, as was evident with the release of its forest plan last month. It can lead to jarring decisions, such as the recommendation to open the door to all-terrain vehicles in limited areas of the forest.

Leahy and Jeffords, in their statements on the Wilderness Act, indicated that Bill S. 2565 is an extension of the work done by the Forest Service, and they, too, expect differences of opinion. Aware of the timber industry's concerns about wilderness, the senators said the new designations are not meant to interfere with that industry. "Most of the lands designated in this bill are not suitable for timber harvesting," Leahy said. "This legislation would retain many thousands of acres available for timber harvesting."

There will be time for public discussion on the bill. Vermonters are sure to become involved. But as Leahy urged, people should "look beyond their own primary areas of concern."

They should look to the future. Expanding the wilderness is a visionary initiative, a gift to next generations and to the health and biodiversity of the national forest. Over time, as wild nature becomes more scarce, the Green Mountain National Forest's wilderness will become even more valuable.

We have the opportunity to place this land in trust for our children's children. If we don't protect our wilderness now, it will be gone.